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ABSTRACT

To investigate factors that influence a student not to enroll in a high school vocational curriculum, a study sought to determine the following: (1) what relationships exist between the high school students' sex, race, socioeconomic status, and curriculum choice and the students' image of vocational education; and (2) what image of vocational education is held by high school students and their parents. Data were collected by questionnaires administered to all 633 11th-grade nonvocational students enrolled in five randomly selected schools within the Southwest Ohio Region Personnel Development Center during the 1987-88 school year. Sixteen parents of these students were interviewed over the telephone. The statistical analysis included descriptive, correlational, and analysis of variance techniques. The following are among the results reported: (1) the students whose images of vocational education are most negative are white, male, of a high socioeconomic status, and enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum; (2) males' images were more negative than females', whites' images were more negative than blacks' and other minorities', and the images of those with the highest socioeconomic status were more negative than of those with the lowest socioeconomic status--although sex, race, and socioeconomic status were found to account for only a small amount of the variance; (3) 55 percent of the students said they had neither a positive nor a negative view of vocational education; and (4) parents' images were similar to students'. (A six-item bibliography is included.) (CML)

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STUDENT AND PARENT IMAGES OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION OFFERINGS:
DECLINING ENROLLMENT IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Declining enrollment is a major concern for agricultural education programs all across the country. There are many plausible explanations for this decline. Population trends show a decline in the numbers of high school-aged students. Increased graduation requirements have put a lot of pressure on students to ensure that they receive adequate academic preparation. College entrance requirements have gone up, thus making students hesitant to commit a major portion of their high school program to vocational education. The increased requirements jeopardize the vocational course offerings that students are advised to take, especially if they are college-bound students. As a result, students are taking fewer electives in vocational education.

These pressures keep enrollment figures low. According to a report released by the National FFA Center, Participation in Selected FFA Activities, enrollment in secondary programs is on the decline. U.S. enrollment in vocational agriculture in 1982-83 was 611,361 compared to 532,917 students in 1986-87, a decline of 13% in only four years.

Miller (1988) examined measurements of images of the FFA by significant groups of people, including high school students enrolled and not enrolled in vocational agriculture, and parents. The strengths of the FFA were addressed, as well as improvements needed. Parents recognized a need to increase membership. Vocational agriculture students felt that public relations efforts were needed in order to improve the image of the FFA.

What do students think of when asked to think about vocational education? What are students' images of vocational agriculture? One student in this study commented, that he/she thought of "farmers being bored and discussing the eatable [sic] parts of a cow in a room." Is this a true picture of today's vocational agriculture classroom? Will this image lead to increased enrollment?

The choice to enter into a vocational education curriculum is a choice toward choosing a career. Lam (1982) classified barriers that influence a student's decision to not enroll in vocational education. This classification system divides the reasons into three main categories. The first category is intrapersonal reasons which includes: attitudes, perceptions, images, motivation, career maturity and value systems. The second category is immediate external reasons, which includes two sub-categories: school factors (distance to schools, friends, extracurricular activities) and influence of others (friends, parents, counselors, neighbors, teachers and other relatives). The final category is remote external reasons which includes socioeconomic status, parental income and parental educational levels. Choosing a career is a decision made by the student, with assistance from parents, friends, counselors and teachers. Super (1963) and Ginzberg (1951) believe that

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occupational choice is influenced by both standards of the community and by internal impulses.

PURPOSES AND OBJECTIVES

This study investigated factors that influence a student not to enter into a high school vocational curriculum. More specifically, the following served as objectives for the study.

1. To determine the relationships between selected student characteristics (sex, race, socioeconomic status, curriculum choice) and images of vocational education.
2. To determine student and parent images of vocational education.

PROCEDURES

This study was developed as descriptive survey research. A cluster sample technique was employed. The population used in this study was all non-vocational 11th grade students in schools within the Southwest Ohio Region Personnel Development Center during the 1987-88 school year. Five schools were randomly selected from the population. All 11th grade, non-vocational students in these schools were surveyed. The sample was composed of 633, 11th grade, non-vocational students.

Students in the sample were identified by curriculum choice. They were classified as either academic (college preparatory) or general curriculum students. Guidance counselors sorted the students according to curriculum choice based on an established set of guidelines. Teachers and students also assisted in the sorting of students by curriculum.

A student questionnaire was developed by the researcher following the principles outlined by Dillman (1978). A review of related literature and research and interviews with educators assisted in the design of the instrument. The instrument was designed in order to obtain information about factors that influence a student not to enter into a high school vocational curriculum. The questionnaire was pilot tested and field tested. Construct validity was established by two panels of experts. Test-retest procedures were used to determine coefficients of stability for important questionnaire items. Pearson product moment coefficients ranged from .42 to 1.00. Cronbach's alpha was evaluated to determine the reliability of the summated scales. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .63 to .83. Questionnaires were personally administered by the researcher and research assistants.

A random sample of 16 parents were interviewed on the telephone in order to determine their images of vocational education. Parents responded to a set of ten questions.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

All completed questionnaires were coded and data were entered into a personal computer and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Statistical analysis included: descriptive, correlational and analysis of variance techniques. The telephone interviewer took notes and summarized parental responses.

RESULTS

Students' images of vocational education were measured with a composite score of students' responses to a list of potential reasons for not enrolling in vocational education. Students responded whether they strongly agreed (5), agreed (4), were unsure (3), disagreed (2), or strongly disagreed (1) with these reasons. Those who strongly agreed with the reasons (higher composite scores) were judged to have a negative image of vocational education. Those responding that they strongly disagreed (lower composite score) were judged to have a positive image of vocational education.

Student characteristics (sex, race, socioeconomic status, curriculum choice) were correlated with students' images of vocational education. Relationships show that students who are most negative are white and male, from a high socioeconomic status, and in a college preparatory curriculum.

There was a statistically significant ($p < .05$) difference in mean scores between males' ($\bar{X} = 2.84$) and females' ($\bar{X} = 2.71$) images of vocational education. That is, males had a more negative image of vocational education than did females. The low relationship ($Eta = .11$) indicates that only one percent of the variance in image score is explained by sex.

Students following an academic curriculum had a higher mean score (a more negative image of vocational education) ($\bar{X} = 2.88$) than students in a general curriculum ($\bar{X} = 2.61$). The difference in mean scores was statistically significant ($p < .05$). The low relationship ($Eta = .21$) indicates that only four percent of the variance in the image of vocational education scores is explained by curriculum choice.

There was a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) between students' race and their image of vocational education. The relationship between race and image ($Eta = .11$) was low, showing little practical significance. White students had a mean score of $\bar{X} = 2.80$ showing they had a more negative image of vocational education than black students ($\bar{X} = 2.65$) or students from other races ($\bar{X} = 2.59$).

Students from the highest socioeconomic status had a statistically significant more negative image of vocational education ($\bar{X} = 2.95$) than did students from the lowest socioeconomic status ($\bar{X} = 2.69$). The practical significance is indicated by $Eta = .15$, indicating a low relationship.

Fifty-five percent of the students indicated that they had neither a positive nor negative image of vocational education. Thirty-one percent indicated that they disagreed with the statements (reasons for not enrolling) indicating they had a more positive image. One percent strongly disagreed with the listed reasons, indicating they had a very positive image. Twelve percent agreed with the statements, showing a negative image and one percent strongly agreed, showing a most negative image. The mean scores for the composite image scores was 2.77 indicating they tended to have a very slightly positive image of vocational education.

Images of vocational education were also determined through students' responses to an open-ended question: "Describe your thoughts when you think about vocational education." The comments (592) were categorized into positive, negative and neutral thoughts. Forty-six percent of the thoughts

were judged to be positive, forty-three percent were judged to be negative and eleven percent were judged to be neutral.

Positive thoughts were classified into eight categories. Sixteen percent of the 592 thoughts listed were of the opinion that vocational education was fine for students who do not go on to college. Eight percent of the thoughts centered around the idea that vocational education provides a good learning experience and opportunity. Six percent of the thoughts dealt with the issue that vocational education trains students for a specific type of career. Four percent of the thoughts indicated that vocational education helps a student become better qualified for a career.

Another four percent want to or plan to take vocational education courses. Three percent felt that vocational education prepares students for a career directly after high school. Another three percent indicated that vocational education could help you in the future. One percent said that vocational education is interesting, fun or exciting.

Negative thoughts were classified into eleven categories. Ten percent of the 592 thoughts listed were of the opinion that vocational education is all right for some people, but it is not for them. That is, they see benefits for others but it isn't good enough for them. Nine percent of the thoughts centered around the notion that vocational education is for troublemakers and that it has a bad reputation and poor image. Seven percent of the comments indicated that vocational education was not interesting. Five percent of the thoughts were of the opinion that vocational education is the easy way out. They felt it was not challenging and was too easy.

Three percent felt that vocational education limited their knowledge about other career choices. Two percent looked at vocational education as a program where a student works for half a day and then takes classes for half a day. They assumed the students in these cooperative classes needed the money. Two percent boldly proclaimed that they felt vocational education is a waste of time. Another two percent felt that vocational education is for low income, low intelligence students. Another two percent said that vocational education does not offer courses required for college. One percent indicated that scheduling of vocational courses was a problem. Another one percent felt that classes are too difficult.

Neutral thoughts were classified into three categories. Seven percent of the thoughts indicated that students never thought much about vocational education. Three percent indicated that vocational education reminded them of vocational agriculture and farming. One percent indicated they didn't know anything about vocational education.

In order to determine the parents' images of vocational education a telephone interview was conducted. Parents' images were similar to those of students.

The first question was, what are your feelings about vocational education? Two comments reflected that parents have a favorable feeling about vocational education. Two other comments felt that vocational education is well suited to some types of students. Two comments indicated that it can benefit students who do not go to college. One parent admitted that he/she has never thought about vocational education. Another thought that it is for

students interested in the classes the schools offer. One said they did not know what vocational education is about. One parent felt that it was fine for those who have already made their career choice and know what direction to take. One comment shared that the vocational education was a place for students who want to go to college. One realized that vocational education is important. One parent felt it was for below average students.

These parents were also asked to describe the typical vocational student. These descriptions reveal parents' images including positive, negative and neutral thoughts about vocational students. One thought that the students in vocational education were students who were not preparing to go to college. Another said that these students are smarter than we give them credit for. Students were described as being hardworking, ambitious, practical, work oriented, not school oriented, average, and that they like to work with their hands. One did not know what the typical student was like and offered no additional comment. One said that they did not hold a negative image of vocational students. Another parent felt that vocational students want to learn a trade and end up with a good job. The majority of parents' comments were judged to be positive.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There were low relationships between student characteristics (sex, race, socioeconomic status, curriculum choice) and images of vocational education. The student who is most negative is a white male from a high socioeconomic status in an academic curriculum.

Students' images of vocational education were obtained from two sources of data. A composite score of students' responses to a set of reasons for not enrolling in vocational education indicated that students were very slightly positive about vocational education. The second source of data is from students' open-ended responses to the question, "describe your thoughts when you think about vocational education?" The comments were judged to be positive (46%), negative (43%) and neutral (11%).

Parents' images, as reflected in a telephone interview were similar to those of students. Many comments centered around the notion that vocational education is a beneficial program for students not planning to attend college.

Further research is needed in order to determine how students and parents arrive at their perceptions about vocational education. It is also advisable that researchers look at the future occupational training needs for the U.S. labor force. New vocational program offerings should be designed to meet labor market needs and student interests. If current programs are of little interest to those who did not enroll, alternative offerings need to be developed and marketed in an interesting fashion.

Many students indicated that they are not enrolling in vocational education because they are preparing to enter college. Vocational programs could be redesigned in order to serve the needs of these students. Vocational courses could be offered for enrichment, exploratory or investigative purposes. New delivery systems will need to be in place so the vocational elective classes can still be a part of the college bound students' schedules.

It is evident from this study that marketing efforts need to be increased. Many students and parents held neutral images of vocational education and indicated that they were uninformed.

One needs to look in depth at the students' negative images of vocational education. Each of these negative thoughts is a perceived barrier for student enrollment. Now that the barriers have been further identified, steps must be taken to reduce or eliminate these barriers.

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